

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

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PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

Shelley, PERCY BYSSHE, one of the greatest of English poets, was born on 4th August 1792, at Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, the eldest child of Timothy Shelley and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of Charles Pilfold of Effingham, Surrey. The family was old and honourable. Bysshe Shelley, the poet's grandfather, married two heiresses, acquired a great property, and in 1806 received a baronetcy; in 1815 he died. Percy was a boy of much sensibility, quick imagination, and generous heart; physically of a refined type of beauty, blue-eyed, golden-haired. At ten years old he became a pupil of Dr Greenlaw's at Sion House School, Isleworth, where he made some progress in classics, listened with delight to lectures on natural science, and endured much rough handling from his schoolfellows. In 1804 he passed to Eton, where Dr Goodall was then head-master. He continued his study of the classics, read eagerly Lucretius and Pliny, became a disciple of the 18th-century sceptical and revolutionary writers, pored over Godwin's *Political Justice*, filled his imagination with the wonders of modern science, resisted the system of school-fagging, and held aloof from the throng of the schoolboys, who in turn made him the object of systematic persecution. While still at Eton he wrote a crude romance, in the manner of M. G. Lewis, which was published with the title *Zastrozzi* in April 1810. Before the close of the year a second romance, *St Irvyne, or the Rosicrucian*, appeared; it is as absurd as its predecessor in its sentimental extravagance, its pseudo-passion, and mock sublimity. He assisted his cousin Thomas Medwin in a long poem on the subject of *The Wandering Jew* (1810), and issued

with some fellow-rhymer a volume of verse (now known only through reviews), *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*. Possibly his collaborator was his cousin Harriet Grove, whom Shelley loved with a boy's passion. Her parents, alarmed by Shelley's religious scepticism, put a stop to the correspondence between the cousins. In April 1810 Shelley matriculated at University College, Oxford, and in Michaelmas term entered on residence. His chief friend was a student from Durham, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who has left a most vivid account of Shelley's Oxford life. Hogg was shrewd, sarcastic, unimpassioned, and withal a genuine lover of literature. He aided Shelley in putting forth a slender volume of poems, originally written by Shelley with a serious intention, now retouched with a view to burlesque—*Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*—the pretended authoress being a mad washerwoman who had attempted the life of the king. In February 1811 a small pamphlet by Shelley, entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, was printed. When it was offered for sale in Oxford, the college authorities conceived it their duty to interfere; Shelley and Hogg were interrogated respecting its authorship, and having refused to reply, were expelled from University College (March 25, 1811) for contumacy and for declining to disavow the pamphlet. For a time the friends lived together in London lodgings; then Hogg departed to the country and Shelley remained alone. In his solitude he found some pleasure in the society of a schoolfellow of his sisters at Clapham, Harriet Westbrook, a fresh and pretty girl of sixteen, daughter of a retired coffee-house keeper. She moved under the tutelage of an unmarried sister nearly twice her own age. When summer came Shelley was with cousins in Wales; letters reached him from Harriet in London complaining of domestic persecution, and speaking of suicide as a possible means of escape; a letter followed in which she threw herself on Shelley's protection, and proposed to fly with him from her home. Shelley hastened to see her, but at the same time assured a cousin that he did not love Harriet, though he was prepared to devote himself to her through a sentiment of chivalry. On meeting him she avowed her passion, and he left her with a promise that if she summoned him he would come at her call and make her his. The summons came speedily; Shelley and Harriet, aged nineteen and sixteen, took coach for Edinburgh, and were there

formally united as man and wife on 28th August 1811. He assured his bride that, in accordance with principles which he firmly held, the union of man and wife might be dissolved as soon as ever it ceased to contribute to their mutual happiness.

Coming from Edinburgh to York, where Hogg resided, the young married pair were joined by Eliza Westbrook, the elder sister. Ill conduct of Hogg towards Harriet caused a temporary alienation between the friends. The Shelleys with Eliza moved to Keswick, where Southey's presence was an attraction. Southey was kind and helpful, but his lack of revolutionary ardour and his indifference to metaphysical speculation displeased Shelley. The young enthusiast found a monitor more to his liking in Godwin, with whom he now corresponded as a disciple with a master. To apply at once his ideas of reforming the world he resolved to visit Ireland, and there advocate Catholic emancipation and Repeal of the Union. On reaching Dublin he printed and scattered abroad an *Address to the Irish People*, written at Keswick. This was soon followed by a second pamphlet, *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*. He spoke at a large public meeting from the same platform with O'Connell, and made the acquaintance of Curran. Discouraged by the small results of his efforts, and yielding to Godwin's advice, he left Ireland (April 4, 1812), and after some wanderings in Wales found rest in a cottage at Lynmouth, then a lonely fishing-village. Here he received as a visitor Miss Hitchener, a Sussex schoolmistress, whom both before and for a time after his marriage he had idealised into all that is most heroic and exalted in womanhood, and with whom he was ere long more than disenchanted. He wrote a vigorous pamphlet on behalf of liberty of printing—the *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*—amused himself with circulating, by means of bottles and boxes set afloat in the Channel and by fire-balloon, copies of his satirical poem *The Devil's Walk* and his revolutionary broadsheet *Declaration of Rights*, and was at work on his *Queen Mab*. His servant, having been found posting up at Barnstaple the offensive broadsheet, was imprisoned, and Shelley crossed to Wales. He took up his abode at Tremadoc, where he was much interested in the scheme of a great embankment against the sea. In October he made Godwin's personal acquaintance in London. During the winter he was active in the relief of the suffering poor of Tremadoc, studied history and philosophy,

What
happened to
Harriet

and added to his manuscript poems. On the night of 26th February 1813 an attempt was either really made by some villain to enter the lonely house of Tanyralt, or Shelley with over-heated fancy conjured up such an outrage. He hastily quitted Tremadoc, and, after an excursion to Dublin, Cork, and Killarney, once again settled in London. In June 1813 his wife gave birth to a daughter who was named Ianthe (married to Mr Esdaile, died 1876). On Harriet's recovery some stay was made at Bracknell in Berkshire. *Queen Mab* was printed for private distribution, its religious and political views being considered too hostile to received opinions to admit of public circulation. The poem sets forth Shelley's youthful conceptions of the past history of humanity, its present evils, and future progress. It is often crude, often rhetorical, yet there is more than a promise of poetical power in certain passages. In the autumn (1813)—perhaps to obtain time to settle with creditors—Shelley and his household went northward to the English Lakes, and thence to Edinburgh, but before the new year opened he was settled at Windsor. About this time he wrote a prose dialogue (published 1814), *A Refutation of Deism*, designed to prove that there is no *via media* between Christianity and Atheism.

In March 1814 Shelley went through the ceremony of marriage with Harriet according to the rites of the English Church, probably to set at rest any doubts of the validity of the Scotch marriage. He was endeavouring to raise large sums of money on Godwin's behalf, and the marriage may have been considered advisable to render certain the legitimacy of a future son and heir. Four months later he had separated from his wife for ever. Their early married happiness had become hopelessly clouded; an attempt at reconciliation made by Shelley in May was rejected. Harriet withdrew to Bath. It was stated by Miss Clairmont, the daughter of Godwin's second wife, that Shelley declared in July 1814 that Harriet had yielded herself to a certain Major Ryan, and Godwin in 1817 stated in writing that he had evidence independent of Shelley of her unfaithfulness before Shelley left her. No such evidence is in our possession to-day, and statements to the contrary were made by Harriet herself and by several persons who knew her well. The division between husband and wife, whatever its causes, was deep. Shelley had become suddenly and passionately

enamoured of Godwin's daughter, Mary, a girl of fine intellect and vigorous character. Having informed Harriet of his resolve to leave her finally, and having made arrangements for her material comfort, he took flight to the Continent with Mary Godwin on 28th July 1814. Miss Clairmont accompanied the fugitives. Shelley was inexperienced enough to suppose that Harriet could still regard him as a considerate friend, though no longer her husband.

After a journey across France and a short stay in Switzerland, Shelley and his companions returned by the Rhine to England. The last months of 1814 were full of vexation caused by debts and duns. But in January 1815 Shelley's grandfather died, and by an arrangement with his father he obtained an income of a thousand a year. His health unhappily showed the effects of the previous year's strain and excitement. He sought rest and refreshment in Devon, and in August found a home at Bishopsgate, on the edge of Windsor Forest. In the autumn of 1815 *Alastor*, his first really admirable poem, was written. It tells of the ruin of an idealist who, pining for absolute love and beauty, shuns human society; its visionary landscapes have the largeness and ideality characteristic of Shelley. In January 1816 Mary gave birth to a son, who was named after her father; but Godwin still held aloof. It was decided to try life upon the Continent, and in May Shelley and Mary travelled through France to Geneva. Miss Clairmont, whose intrigue with Byron was unknown to Shelley and Mary, accompanied them. On the shores of the Lake of Geneva a meeting took place between Byron and Shelley. They rowed and sailed together on the lake, and Shelley in company with Mary made an excursion to Chamouni. In the poem *Mont Blanc* and the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* we find a poetic record of the impressions of these memorable days.

In September they were once more in England. The suicide, following a state of deep depression, of Fanny, the half-sister of Mary (see GODWIN, WILLIAM), gave Shelley a great shock, and this disaster was soon followed by the death of Harriet Shelley. For some time past Shelley had in vain inquired for her. She had formed an irregular connection with one who, it is believed, deserted her. On 10th December her body was discovered in the Serpentine; had she lived she would soon have given birth to a

child. It was another severe shock to Shelley, but he always maintained that he himself was 'innocent of ill, either done or intended.' Free now to make Mary his lawful wife, he at once celebrated his marriage (30th December 1816). A long Chancery suit followed, Shelley seeking to obtain possession of his daughter Ianthe and his son Charles (born November 1814—died 1826), the Westbrooks resisting. At length Lord Eldon gave judgment which compromised the matter; Shelley's opinions being such as led to immoral and illegal conduct, he was disqualified for bringing up his children, but he might appoint caretakers and tutors to be approved by the court. The blow was deeply felt by Shelley. While the Chancery affair was proceeding he was cheered by the friendship of Leigh Hunt and of Horace Smith. His home was at Marlow on the Thames, and here he wrote fragments of his *Prince Athanase*, a portion of *Rosalind and Helen*, and his long narrative poem *Laon and Cythna*, designed to sustain men's hopes in ideals of freedom and progress during days of political reaction. When some few copies of *Laon and Cythna* had been issued the publisher withdrew it from circulation, and induced Shelley to alter certain lines and phrases which might give offence. As thus revised the poem was issued with a new title, *The Revolt of Islam*. During his residence at Marlow Shelley worked earnestly and systematically in the relief of the poor. He printed two pamphlets, *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote*, by 'The Hermit of Marlow,' and *An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*. In the spring of 1818 it was feared that he was threatened with pulmonary disease. He decided to seek a southern climate, and in April, with Mary, little William, an infant daughter Clara (born 2d September 1817), Miss Clairmont and her child Allegra (Byron's daughter), he left England for Italy, never again to see his native land.

In the summer of 1818, at the Baths of Lucca, Shelley completed his *Rosalind and Helen*, and made his translation of Plato's *Banquet*. Grief came with the autumn; little Clara died on 24th September at Venice, where Shelley had been renewing his companionship with Byron. Memorials of this visit to Venice, with an idealised presentation of Byron, will be found in the admirable poem *Julian and Maddalo*. He contemplated a tragedy of *Tasso*, but this was set aside in favour of his

great lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, the first act of which was written at Este, September-October 1818. Seeking a warmer climate for the winter, he journeyed to Rome, and thence to Naples. His letters descriptive of Southern Italy are full of radiance and luminous beauty. In the spring (1819) he was again in Rome, and found great delight in its classical sculpture and architectural remains. Among the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla he wrote the second and third acts of *Prometheus*. The fourth act—~~not~~ originally conceived as part of the poem—was added before the close of the year at Florence. On 7th June 1819 Shelley's beloved son William died at Rome. The afflicted parents sought the neighbourhood of kind friends near Leghorn, and here—at the Villa Valsovano—Shelley wrote the greater part of his dark and pathetic tragedy *The Cenci*. At Leghorn the first edition was printed in quarto. The other works of this memorable year were written at Florence—a prose treatise called *A Philosophical View of Reform* (still unpublished in its entirety); a poetical appeal to his countrymen on the occasion of the 'Peterloo' affair, entitled *The Mask of Anarchy*; a grotesque satire suggested by the supposed failure of Wordsworth's poetic powers under the blight of Toryism—*Peter Bell the Third*; a translation of *The Cyclops* of Euripides; and in addition to these some of his noblest lyrical poems, among them the magnificent *Ode to the West Wind*.

On 12th November 1819 a son was born to comfort his father and mother, Percy Florence (died 5th December 1889). The climate of Florence was found trying, and in January the Shelley household moved to Pisa, where was spent the greater part of the poet's remaining days. The year 1820 was less productive than 1819. The charming poetical *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, a spirited translation of the Homeric *Hymn to Mercury*, the brilliant fantasy of *The Witch of Atlas*, the satirical drama *Ædipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant*, which deals not very happily with the affair of Queen Caroline, are the chief writings of 1820. As the year was closing the Shelleys made the acquaintance of a beautiful girl, Emilia Viviani, who was confined in the convent of St Anna. To Shelley's imagination for a brief time she became the incarnation, as it were, of all that is most perfect, all that is most radiant in the universe. At such a moment he wrote his *Epipsychidion*, which is rather a homage to the ideal as seen in

womanhood than a poem addressed to an individual woman. It was followed by a remarkable piece of prose—the critical study entitled *A Defence of Poetry*.

A small circle of interesting friends had gathered about Shelley at Pisa. Among these were Edward Williams, a young lieutenant of dragoons, and his wife Jane, to whom many of Shelley's latest lyrics were addressed. In the summer of 1821 the Shelleys and Williamses had much pleasant intercourse at the Baths of San Giuliano. The elegy *Adonais*, suggested by the death of Keats, was here written; it is Shelley's most finished piece of art. In the late summer or autumn he swiftly composed his *Hellas*, a lyrical drama suggested by passing events in Greece. Early next year Byron was settled in Pisa, and Shelley had also an interesting new companion in Trelawny, a young man of ardent and romantic temper. Shelley worked somewhat tentatively at his unfinished historical drama *Charles I*. His last great poem, also unfinished, *The Triumph of Life*, was written in his boat near Casa Magni, a lonely house on the eastern side of the Bay of Spezzia, occupied as a summer residence by the Shelleys, together with Edward and Jane Williams. On 19th June Shelley heard of the arrival in Italy of Leigh Hunt and his family. He and Williams, some days later, set sail for Leghorn. The meeting with Hunt was full of joy and hope. On Monday, 8th July, Shelley and Williams left the port of Leghorn with a favourable breeze; the boat was observed at ten miles distance; then it was lost in sudden storm and mist. Dreadful uncertainty for a time came upon the two widowed women at Casa Magni. On 19th July the bodies were found upon the shore near Via Reggio. By special permission they were consumed by fire in the presence of Trelawny, Hunt, and Byron. The ashes of Shelley were placed in a casket, and were afterwards interred in the Protestant burial-ground at Rome.

In person Shelley was tall and slight, and if not of exact formal beauty of face had a countenance full of spiritual beauty, radiant with its luminous blue eyes. His portrait, painted in Rome by Miss Curran, is the only likeness of Shelley in manhood. His poetry is inspired by an ardent passion for truth, an ardent love of humanity; it expresses desires and regrets with peculiar intensity, but also sets forth a somewhat stoical ideal of self-possession, as if to balance the excessive sensitiveness of its author. The earlier poetry is ag-

gressive and doctrinaire, embodying the views and visions of Godwin's philosophy; the later is more purely emotional. Shelley's creed, which passed at an early stage from deism to atheism, rested in his mature years on a spiritual conception of the universe.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY, daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and wife of the poet Shelley, was born August 30, 1797. Her life from 1814 to 1822 was bound up with that of Shelley. Her first and most impressive novel, *Frankenstein*, had its origin in a proposal of Byron's made in 1816 at his villa on the Lake of Geneva, that Mary and Shelley, Polidori (Byron's young physician), and Byron himself should write each a ghost story. *Frankenstein* (q.v.) was published in 1818. The influence of Godwin's romances is apparent throughout. Her second tale, *Valperga, or the Life and Adventures of Castuccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), is a historical romance of mediæval Italy. In 1823 she returned to England with her son. Her husband's father, in granting her an allowance, insisted on the suppression of the volume of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*, edited by her; and she was obliged to submit. *The Last Man* (1826), a romance of the ruin of human society by pestilence, fails to attain sublimity, but we can trace in it with interest idealised portraits of some of the illustrious persons most intimately known to her. In *Lodore* (1835) we read under a disguise the story of Shelley's alienation from his first wife. Her last novel, *Falkner*, appeared in 1837. She published several short tales in the annuals, some of which have been collected and edited by Dr Garnett. Of her occasional pieces of verse the most remarkable is *The Choice*. She wrote also many of the lives of Italian and Spanish literary men in Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopædia*. Her *Journal of a Six Weeks' Tour* (partly by Shelley) tells of the excursion to Switzerland in 1814; *Rambles in Germany and Italy* describes a series of tours in her later years. She will be remembered by *Frankenstein* and her admirable notes—in large part biographical—to her husband's poems. Those who knew her intimately valued Mary Shelley for her nobility of character, even more than for her fine intellect. She died February 21, 1851, and was buried in Bournemouth.

The best edition of Shelley's works in verse and prose is Mr H. B. Forman's (8 vols. 1876-80). Mr Forman has also given an admirable text of the poetical works

in two volumes. Mr Rossetti's edition of the poetical works is of great value. The most complete one-volume edition of the poetical works is that by the present writer (Professor Dowden), who has also written the fullest and most exact Life of Shelley (2 vols. 1886). Mrs Julian Marshall has written a valuable Life of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (2 vols. 1889); and there is a short Life of her by Mrs W. M. Rossetti. Short lives of Shelley have been written by Mr Symonds, Mr Rossetti, Mr Salt, and Mr W. Sharp, and by the poet's daughter-in-law, Lady Shelley. Hogg's Life of Shelley is excellent for the months at Oxford. Trelawny's *Records* gives a vivid picture of Shelley during his last days. Dr Garnett's *Relics of Shelley* gave for the first time many pieces recovered from MSS. The same careful editor has superintended an admirable selection from Shelley's *Letters* (1882). Mr Forman's *Shelley Bibliography* (1882) is full and accurate. The publications of the 'Shelley Society' include reprints of several rare editions. A *Shelley Concordance* is promised by Mr F. S. Ellis.

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